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How Older Workers Can Help Solve the Health Care Workforce Puzzle

by Kim Fernandez

Every day, Ann Mitchell takes her seat behind a receptionist's desk at Asbury Methodist Village, Gaithersburg, Md., and gets to work answering phones, manning the front door, caring for the assisted living facility's pet bird and fish, and keeping company with the many residents who wander down the hall for visits.

It's a standard job in many communities but for one detail. "A lot of them are younger than I am," says Mitchell with a laugh. She'll be 82 in December and has worked at Asbury for nearly 12 years, first as a volunteer and now as a paid employee. "I live alone and drive my own car," she points out.

Ulf Wallin

Ann Mitchell, 82, is a receptionist at Asbury Methodist Village.

Experts say Mitchell is far from alone, and that aging services providers would do well to consider hiring more employees like her—that is, older than 70—to stem the tide of a shrinking workforce by making the most of a demographic group that's increasingly loath to retire.

"Tomorrow's worker could be today's resident," says Brad Reynolds, chief people officer at Asbury Communities. "Look at the demographics of the people going into this field. It's one of the few that's still hiring."

Couple that with a general shortage of health care workers entering the field, he says, and it's something of the perfect storm.

“For most of us, there’s a train wreck coming,” he says. “Our workers are retiring, and they’re not being replaced by new workers.” It only makes sense, then, to look to older people to fill the jobs. Reynolds says that will take some re-thinking of traditional jobs, including those that are physically intense, but may be worth it.

“If you show up for work these days when you’re supposed to, everybody’s happy,” he says. “Older people still have a different mentality about work, I think, in some ways. So if their efforts are there and their hearts are there, can we rearrange some of our jobs so that the body can support what the heart wants to do?”

Working Longer

According to the Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies, more than one-third of people in the current workforce say they plan to work until age 70 or later, bucking a long-standing trend of retirement at or before age 65. Part of that, their studies suggest, is due to the economy—only 10 percent of Americans say they’re confident that they’ll ever be able to retire comfortably. And in addition to those who plan to continue working past retirement age, 54 percent of respondents to their survey said they would retire, but keep on working in some other capacity past that point.

Beatitudes Campus

Cliff Kau, 66, and his father, Louis, 91, a resident at Beatitudes Campus. Despite opportunities to go back into construction for much more money, Kau has found a job he loves serving seniors.

Cliff Kau is one of those people. Now 66, he never envisioned himself working in assisted living. But he was laid off in 2002 after 25 years in construction and leapt at a job in materials management at Beatitudes Campus, Phoenix, Ariz. He’s been there ever since.

“This was a stopping-off point,” says Kau. “I was making more than twice as much money in construction. But it took me all of two weeks to realize that money is not the important thing in life. I started to get to know the residents and I love having about 600 grandparents. It’s pretty neat. Everybody says if you find a job you love, you’ll never work a day in your life, and that’s the way it is here.”

Marian Levine, vice president, human resources at Martins Run, Media, Pa., says that's not unusual. She currently employs 37 people age 60 and older, in all sorts of jobs.

"We really have the bell curve here," she says. "We have older people in administration, companion services, housekeeping, laundry services, and we have CNAs and nurses in that category. Some of our drivers are older as well."

She says while her company doesn't specifically recruit older workers, she's found them to be ideal employees.

"They love to work with the residents," she says. "Some of the residents aren't much older than the caregivers and there are people who are not far apart in age on both sides. They really enjoy the companionship and they like what they're doing. They're very committed to working in a helping profession."

Mitchell says she worked as a Florida caregiver for years before moving to Maryland in 2000. Volunteering at Asbury was a natural fit for her, having time on her hands.

"I liked it so well, I pushed a few buttons to get hired." And her answer for why she wanted a full-time job is simple.

"I like to eat," she says.

"Experience Can't Be Downloaded"

Kau says he wasn't at all sure about his job when he started.

"Before I took this job, I avoided places—restaurants and stores—that catered to older people," he says. "I didn't want to be around them. I didn't want to admit that I was getting old too." He took the job because he needed the income, and now says he'd never leave it.

"There are a lot of people out there who think a job [for an older person] has to be like being a greeter at Wal-Mart," he says. "It's not like that. I think people who are good at recruiting and good at talking to people from the HR department can change that."

"What are we going to do to restructure jobs so older people can do them without fear of injury?" asks Reynolds. "We'll have to redesign some of these positions. Maybe we can get some mechanical support for some of these jobs. We need to get people out of the mentality that they can't do it. Experience can't be downloaded. We're always looking for the quick fix for our problems, and a lot of older adults have the experience that helps."

He says he's had luck recruiting semi-retired nurses to provide hands-on care, and has several recruiting strategies that have worked to bring older workers through the door.

"You do the same thing you do for anybody else," he says. "Who are the top three or four people who work for you? Find out where they came from and follow the trail back. It's the same thing with older adults. The

problem there is that a lot of them have been told they can't do these jobs. So we have to find them and then convince them that we value them. We have people working for us who are between the ages of 16 and 86. We have examples of this being successful."

Want proof? Reynolds says that sometimes looking inside your own facility can do the trick.

"Older folks are already doing this work in [our field]," he says. "They're called volunteers. We always ask how many people are here as their first career, the second, third, or fourth career, and hands keep going up in the room. There is a real need for people to find work, and this field continues to grow and has meaning."

Beatitudes Campus

Judy Hall, 65, a human resources associate, came to Beatitudes Campus 12 years ago after being laid off from her previous job. "Because of my positive experience [here]," says Hall, "I know how the more mature worker feels and this provides me with a deeper understanding of their situation and where they are on their professional path."

"Age is passe in many ways," he continues. "The economy is forcing people to re-examine where jobs are. They want to get into fields where they can be paid with their heart."

Kau says that's definitely true for him—his "stopover" job has now lasted for years.

"It's neat to sit down and listen to these people and find out who they are and what they've done," he says of the residents he meets. "I honestly don't spend a lot of time with them—30 seconds or a minute or two sometimes—but it makes a world of difference in their lives. A lot of them don't have friends or family nearby. They don't get a chance to visit. Putting a smile on their faces is all the thanks I need."

That's why, he says, he put construction and its higher salary away for good. It didn't quite give up on him, however.

"The company I worked for all those years has tried to get me to come back three times now," he says. "The last person came out here personally and spent about 25 minutes trying to talk me into coming back. We walked around the campus and he saw everything here, and then he said, 'I understand why you don't want to leave this place.'"

Kimberly Fernandez is a writer who lives in Bethesda, Md.